

P.O.M.

A casual guide to three basic components of a good philosophy paper

Presented to you by Peter the Pomeranian, semi-official pupper of Binghamton University's Critical Thinking Lab
LT 1205

“Hi y’all! I’m sure you’ve been looking for some pointers on putting together a stellar paper for your philosophy class, and I’m here to help! There are so many things to account for when you write any sort of philosophical essay, but here are three basic essentials you’ll definitely want to have down pat when you get to work on yours. These are some basic aspects of writing which pop up in most longer-form assignments in undergraduate classes.”



P

for POSITION

“P is for position! A firm position on the issue in question is the first thing you should be sure to include in your essay. A common complaint I heard from philosophy professors when writing papers in pet school was that students often demonstrate their recollection of source material well, but don’t go much farther in their work than restating the arguments they’ve studied.”

“To avoid doing this, start by reconstructing the author’s argument. Find the conclusion, locate the premises (the author’s reasoning supporting their conclusion), identify hidden assumptions in the argument, and finally put together an accurate and accessible summary.* If your paper asks you to take a stance on the author’s work, now is the time to do so: whether you defend or rebut the author, you should set out to put forth a distinct claim (i.e. John Rawls’ theory of justice fails because reasons x, y, and z) and persuade your audience through compelling argumentation in which your premises support your conclusion.”

EXAMPLE: when owner tells me his reasons for not letting me dig holes in the garden, it’s not enough for me to listen to his argument and sit with it; it’s my responsibility as a student of philosophy to bork back at him and make sure he knows why I disagree. My thesis: no, hooman, playing in the dirt is morally righteous, because something is morally righteous if it maximizes net happiness for those involved, and this activity provides me with far more happiness than however much sadness it causes you.

O

for OBJECTIONS

“What’s next? Well, you should ensure your paper presents worthwhile objections to the position you’re analyzing. Objections will likely be the primary focus of your body paragraphs and will help support your larger conclusion. If you intend you rebut an author’s argument, the “objections” in your essay will likely be your own, in response to that argument. If you intend to instead defend, you will likely “object” to counterarguments (objections in their own right) against that position. Either way, your objections must identify reasons why the position you oppose is flawed. These include, potentially among many others: the conclusion not following from the premises, any of the premises being false, and the conclusion failing to make sense in other meaningful contexts. You can identify a good objection by certain markers, such as that it explains the area of disagreement well, goes into detail, and poses issues for the author of the position being objected to, i.e. the objection is not already accounted for elsewhere in the source literature.”*

M

for MAKE THINGS CLEAR

Finally, in everything you do in your paper, clarity is essential. Your job as a writer is to convey your point in a persuasive and understandable way. Make things clear! Nothing makes me itch to tear up a sofa cushion more than someone who writes extremely knotty and hard-to-read sentences. There are several issues within the general one of writing clearly that are especially relevant to philosophy. Firstly, technical/specialized vocabulary (a priori, patterned justice, etc.) pops up often. However, this only makes it *more* necessary than usual to clarify what you mean in writing when using such terms. Additionally, there is the issue of semantic slippage, something that can sink an entire argument by building it upon ambiguous ground, or simply confuse your audience. Be consistent with the meaning of terms. To illustrate something similar: when hooman hears me bork in the kitchen, he knows that this is my way of saying I need foods, since that is how I consistently indicate as much to him. If I were to start borking in the kitchen to say I need walkies, he might instead give me dog chow, since he is used to me borking in the living room when I want walkies. Finally, be sure to keep your passive voice to a minimum when writing about complex issues, for this can make sentences inaccessible and obscure your argument.



If you abide by these steps – pawprints? – then you’re already on your way to turning in a solid piece of philosophical writing!

SOURCES/ADDITIONAL READING:

*UNC at Chapel Hill Writing Center > Tips & Tools > Writing for Specific Fields > Philosophy

**Monash Uni. > Research and Writing for Assignments > Writing